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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5695
INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
RUEHGG/UN SECURITY COUNCIL COLLECTIVE
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 0156
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 4466
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 3735
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 7254
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 4825
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA 1046
RUEHCN/AMCONSUL CHENGDU 1045
RUDKIA/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 0838
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000136

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SUBJECT: BURMA SAYS, "NO MORE CHILD SOLDIERS...TRUST US"

REF: 06 RANGOON 1361

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Classified By: Poloff Dean Tidwell for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The Burmese regime brought out its big guns on February 6 to persuade Rangoon-based diplomats that Burmese armed forces no longer recruit child soldiers. SPDC Secretary-1 Lt. Gen. Thein Sein and Foreign Minister Nyan Win

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both told diplomats that the regime has taken all necessary steps to ensure that no underage soldiers have been recruited into its armed forces. Staged visits to a military recruitment center and a basic training facility added little insight to the government's scripted rhetoric. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) The SPDC organized briefings on February 6 to convince foreign diplomats about efforts to eliminate recruitment of underage soldiers. Lt. Gen. Thein Sein, Secretary-1 of the SPDC, Adjutant General of the Armed Forces, and Chairman of the Committee for the Prevention of Military Recruitment of Underage Children (CPMRUC), addressed the diplomats first. He outlined the activities of the CPMRUC since the SPDC established it on January 5, 2004, including the adoption of a Plan of Action. Besides setting up procedures to ensure that youths less than 18 years of age do not enter the military, the Plan of Action includes measures for discharging unqualified soldiers and reintegrating them into civilian society.

¶3. (SBU) Thein Sein also claimed that the CPMRUC consults and cooperates with UNICEF, UNDP, and the ICRC on child soldier issues and said it will soon convene a technical working group. UNICEF, UNDP, and ICRC participated in a military-organized visit to a recruitment center in Mandalay in October 2006. UNICEF told us they hope the announced technical working group will be a mechanism that enables UNICEF to work with the government on specific child soldier

issues. They have been repeatedly rebuffed when they raised the issue in the past and asked to visit military bases.

¶4. (U) Thein Sein said the CPMRUC set up an inter-ministerial taskforce to supervise the implementation of the Plan of Action. The ministries included in the task force are Foreign Affairs, Home Affairs, Labor, Social Welfare, and Relief and Resettlement. Thein Sein stressed that Burma's armed forces are all volunteers who have joined of their own free will. Subsequent briefings by a recruitment spokesperson and the vice-chief of military training claimed that in the recruitment process the candidates are asked more than once whether they joined of their own free will and, if not, they are released.

¶5. (U) Foreign Minister Nyan Win also spoke to the diplomats. He stressed that the CPMRUC wants to work more closely with UNICEF on recruitment issues. In August 2006, UNICEF met with Thein Sein (reftel) and offered to help repatriate discharged soldiers determined to be underage and also to train Burmese military recruiters on international humanitarian law, as well as on Burma's own laws against the recruitment of child soldiers and HIV/AIDS awareness. To date the regime has not responded to UNICEF's offer.

¶6. (C) The briefers admitted that recruits who may be underage sometimes present themselves for military service and lack birth certificates. Therefore, the military requires them to present testimonials from their parents or guardians, stating that they are 18 years old, and requires a second testimonial from their village or ward leader. As a further measure to prevent recruitment of underage soldiers, a new recruit must not be shorter than 5 feet 2 inches, must have an expanded chest measurement of not less than 33 inches, and must weigh not less than 105 pounds. Statistics presented during the briefing claimed that the Burmese armed forces discharged 567 persons during a three-year period from

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2004-2006. Over half (268) did not meet all the enlistment requirements, 177 failed their medical examination, and 122 were discharged for being too young.

¶7. (C) The regime also took diplomats to visit Military Recruitment Center No. 1 at Danyingone, on the outskirts of Rangoon. The visit was clearly orchestrated, with new recruits all seated neatly on raised sleeping platforms in their barracks and an array of newspapers and magazines placed in front of each recruit for his reading pleasure. None of the recruits we saw could be described as children. They were dressed in civilian clothes, although one wore an imitation military jacket that said "U.S. Army" on the front.

A recruit due to be discharged for medical reasons was waiting with his parents to meet the diplomats in a staged discharge ceremony.

¶8. (C) Numerous military equipment identification posters hung in the barracks and the dining room profiling U.S. military equipment including B-1, B-2, and B-52 bombers, a Blackhawk helicopter showing all of its weapons systems, an M-48 battle tank, and an M-113 APC. We did not see any identification charts for Chinese or Indian weapons systems on display.

¶9. (C) The final stop in the tour was the Burmese Army's Basic Training Depot No. 1 at Phaunggyi, Hlegu Township, Rangoon Division. We observed 900 trainees in formation on the parade ground. Our buses drove us around the training facility while we observed another 400-500 trainees engaged in target practice, physical training, and running obstacle courses in full battle gear. The chief of the training facility said they provide 18 weeks of basic training for recruits from all three armed forces and normally train about 3,000 new recruits per year. He said they have trained as many as 5,000 in one year.

¶10. (C) COMMENT: Although the regime produced written directives designed to end forced conscription of underage soldiers, all of the documents we saw dated from the 1970s. This Embassy has regularly reported that thousands of underage soldiers were recruited in subsequent years. Reliable sources have told us about many cases of forced conscription of underage soldiers by army recruiters as recent as 2006. Even though senior military leaders may not condone the recruitment of child soldiers, desperate recruiters who have to meet quotas have no qualms. The regime has invited UNICEF to visit its military recruitment centers in Rangoon and Mandalay, but until the regime allows UNICEF and others to make unannounced visits to any military base to verify for themselves, the regime's claims will remain unpersuasive. END COMMENT.
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